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ABSTRACT

Dynamic classroom role-playing is an essential ingredient in interpretation and performance if the student actor is to learn the technical skills of believable characterization. One of the first classroom performance principles in playing the role is for the student actor to read the playscript with a critical eye to grasp the creative suggestions that are implied in the dialogue, the narrative, and the stage directions. The actor then translates them into a character interpretation that features concrete, specific actions and movements. He or she also needs to cultivate a mental symbol that helps to clearly define the suggested character. Classroom performance exercises provide an excellent foundation to support and reinforce further creative exploration by individual instructors. Participatory activities stimulate awareness of the basic principles of character development and role-playing based upon observation, mental symbols, and visualization. Exercises may be supplemented with pre- and post-assigned discussion, reading, and evaluation to promote increasingly more complex analysis or interpretation techniques that might extend and enrich classroom role-playing and characterizations. Exercises are intended to promote a classroom atmosphere of relaxed inquiry and "risk-free" exploration that encourage student actors to define a more individual, personal style of performance. Some of the suggested exercises, each with its own approach, are: "Sardines Today"--promoting awareness of mental symbols; "Mime 'N Movement"--helping to understand the role movement plays; and "The 'Found' Voice"--helping expand vocal variety in performance. (CR)

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"'Playing The Role': Classroom Performance Approaches To Characterization"

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The beginning classroom actor should be a creative artist who attempts to faithfully capture the unique character traits and mannerisms suggested in a playscript with as much authenticity and accuracy as possible; weaving a rich tapestry of texture and technique in playing a role with keen and discerning individuality and insight. That is not to say, however, that the beginning classroom actor merely "copies" what has been observed or discovered in a critical analysis of the playscript and then submits that interpretation of the character for comparison with the original source of literary inspiration. To take this approach to playing the role would undoubtedly lead to a static, uninspired classroom performance that could not accurately reflect either the dramatic potential of the playscript or the potential skill of the student performer.

Preview

Dynamic classroom role-playing is an essential ingredient in interpretation and performance if the student actor is to learn the technical skills of believable characterization; and to give life and meaning to the fictitious character being performed. Character does not leap from the printed page full-blown in its descriptive suggestion of intention or motivation. Rather, it emerges in more subtle and frequently disguised performance clues pointing the way to particularly striking elements of characterization that enrich classroom role-playing assignments. The tentative classroom performance success of the student actor is to seize these role-playing opportunities provided by the playscript and to fill in the playwright's suggestive, incomplete

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character outline with as much imagination and inventive "self-expression" as possible to give voice and body to a character of substantial form and content.

First Principles

One of the first classroom performance principles in playing the role is for the student actor to read the playscript with a critical eye to grasp the creative suggestions that are implied in the dialogue, the narrative, and the stage directions; and then to translate them into a character interpretation that features concrete, specific actions and movements. The more knowledge the student actor has about the initial dramatic impressions that are part of the literary construction of the playscript the more informed and perceptive will be the subsequent interpretation of the action, the dialogue, and the character in a classroom performance.

At first, the student actor should read the playscript with appreciation to determine the degree of association and familiarity needed to dramatize and to interpret the character descriptions in a classroom performance. The student actor should read the playscript as he/she might read a novel or a short story; initially sorting out the character descriptions or relationships and allowing the "story" to tell itself in the narrative, the dialogue, and the action. If possible, the student actor should read the playscript in one sitting to sense the momentum and inevitable build to a climax suggested in the arrangement of episodes detailed by the author. Particular attention should also be paid to the author's description of the setting and the scenic elements of design; as well as to other theatrical production elements like lighting, sound, or props that might help visualize the situation(s) described in the playscript.

A second reading of the playscript should be more analytical than the first and

concentrate on clarity and comprehension. The student actor should critically evaluate the primary scenes of a character's interaction with others and anticipate potential performance reactions and responses. The student actor should also re-think the initial interpretation of the character gained in the first reading, and then isolate and identify those specific character actions, dialogue, or movements that might help to reinforce or refine the preliminary interpretation. The more objective second reading of the playscript should be enriched with active classroom discussion and written character sketches so that initial, perhaps preconceived, notions of role-playing can be evaluated in terms of the given circumstances provided by the playwright and the detailed critical analysis and classroom discussion.

Second Principle

A second principle in classroom role-playing for the student actor is to cultivate a mental symbol that helps to clearly define the suggested character; and that is why careful analysis of the playscript is essential in understanding the character's primary motivation. The mental symbol indicates the character's ultimate desire, what actions the character is willing to commit to achieve that desire, and the fateful price that must be paid by the character for pursuing the desire. Isolating the character's primary motivation and ultimate desire through perceptive reading and analysis should clarify the student actor's mental symbol and also stimulate imaginative characterization that follows in the classroom performance.

It is important in discovering a character's primary motivation, however, to give that desire a specific "name" as part of the creative process of role-playing. In giving the character's primary motivation or ultimate desire a specific name the student actor is better equipped to

express the mental symbol that has informed the interpretation; and is better able to role-play armed with a stronger sense of the character's intellectual or emotional point of view. Naming a character's primary motivation further encourages the student actor to pursue an illustrative approach to classroom role-playing that gives added performance dimension to the circumstances, the events, and the images associated with the character.

Performance Blueprint

Although no simple classroom performance blueprint exists for predicting the degree of success a student actor might achieve in role-playing, the following exercises developed in classroom performance approaches to characterization should provide an excellent foundation to support and reinforce further creative exploration by individual instructors. Each instructor should approach the exercises in a manner that is comfortable and compatible with an individual style of critical review and disciplined study; and each instructor is encouraged to take the creative liberty of adjusting, modifying, or extending the basic techniques suggested to meet the special needs of classroom assignments in reading, interpretation, and performance. The exercises are framed as participatory activities to stimulate awareness of the basic principles of character development and role-playing based upon observation, mental symbols, and visualization. The instructor may wish to supplement these exercises with pre and post assigned discussion, reading, and evaluation to promote increasingly more complex analysis or interpretation techniques that might extend and enrich classroom role-playing and characterization.

The selected exercises are also intended to promote a classroom atmosphere of relaxed

inquiry and "risk-free" exploration that encourage the student actor to define a more individual, personal style of performance. As preliminary role-playing principles emerge in initial classroom performance assignments, the instructor should translate the general characteristics into meaningful, distinctly personal reading and writing assignments that help to promote individual student interpretation and performance techniques. Continued use of the exercises should enhance well-disciplined, imaginative approaches to classroom scene study and encourage the student actor to more easily identify role-playing performance clues that lead to perceptive interpretation and three-dimensional characterization.

Exercise 1: "Sardines Today!"

Goals: To promote student awareness of mental symbols and to encourage dramatic visualization of scenic elements that might be found in literature.

Approach: Several days before class have your students search the school building for interesting nooks or crannies into which the entire class might barely fit. Have each student select and memorize a short poem, a dramatic monologue, or an individual paragraph from a novel that would be appropriate to the space and the literature selected. For example, Richard Lovelace's "To Althea, From Prison" is ideally suited for classroom performance in a small, cramped storage room; and James Taylor's "Traffic Jam" is exceptional when performed in a broom closet!

On the day of the assignment, the class moves from each nook to each cranny selected and the students perform their literature surrounded by their classmates. The class then reassembles for discussion and evaluations are made concerning appropriate choices

about the role that mental symbols and scenic elements might play in the dramatic visualization of literature. The exercise may be repeated as a "group project" at a later time with selected excerpts from scripted scenes, narrative short stories, or epic poetry that suggest specific locales and feature three-dimensional characters.

Exercise 2: "<u>Mime 'N Movement</u>"

Goals: To promote student understanding of the role that movement might play in role-playing and to introduce the elements of both physical and vocal characterization in classroom performance.

Approach: When introducing movement or physical and vocal characterization in classroom performance, the instructor should remind the student actor that the body and voice are expressive instruments that should be polished as well as fluid and graceful in classroom performance.

Begin the exploration of movement with small groups of students, directing them initially to bend from the waist trying to touch the toes as they respond to the following instructions. Relax the arms in front of the feet once you have touched your toes. Then begin slowly to swing your head <u>and</u> your relaxed arms in a pendulum-like motion as if you were a limp noodle floating in a pot of boiling water. Now, relax your legs and chest cavity as you continue slowly to swing all parts of your body from side-to-side; finally collapsing in a soggy heap in the middle of the floor. (In this part of the exercise, the instructor might wish to play five minutes of popular music to help students free themselves from initial anxiety and tension.)

Next, direct the students to carefully follow these instructions. Lie flat on your back and slightly elevate the knees while keeping the feet flat on the floor. Be sure that your pelvis is tilted toward the knees and that your arms are flat on the floor at your sides. Inhale deeply for a count of (25) and then slowly exhale for a count of (25). When all the tension has been expelled from the chest cavity, purr like a playful kitten and sustain the sound produced for a count of (25). Keeping the pelvis tilted toward the knees, continue to inhale deeply for a count of (25) and then slowly exhale at the same number count as you whimper like a puppy, hiss like a snake, crow like a rooster, and then hum like a bird. Now, stand and execute the following character movement patterns with as much expression of creative style and grace as possible. Remind students not to forget to indicate the "attitude" and "mood" of the characters suggested in each of the following examples as they explore relaxed and fluid bodily actions.

- Move like an anxious salesperson who has misplaced the package of a valued customer.

- Move like a juggler performing a balancing act on a local street corner.

- Move like a tramp stumbling blindly down a lonely country road in winter.

- Move like a cautious old-maid sneaking into an X-rated movies late at night.

When the instructor is comfortable with the elements of vocal and physical characterization suggested in this part of the exercise, extend the assignment by presenting students with a variety of short cuttings from the drama or novel that feature characters whose attitude, mood, or point of view might be expressed in either physical or vocal terms. Examples useful for this extended part of the exercise might include the "balcony scene" in William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the "tea scene" in Oscar Wilde's the Importance of Being Earnest, the "photograph scene" in Franz Kafka's The Trial, the "planting scene" in Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth, and the "raft scene" in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn.

Exercise 3: "The 'Found' Voice"

Goals: To promote student awareness of vocal variety in performance and to encourage meaningful interpretation of scripted language in classroom performance.

Approach: The way in which student actors use vocal variety may well mean the difference between merely saying words and engaging in meaningful communication in classroom performance. There should be active "vocal orchestration" that encourages student actors to interpret the logic of a selected character's dialogue and to also transform sounds into audible transmission of recognized words or language symbols.

To explore the properties of vocal sound in general and to introduce the principle of special effects that students may create in classroom performance, collect a variety of random objects that are capable of conducting and amplifying the human voice. Examples might include cardboard tubes, garden hoses, vacuum cleaner attachments, megaphones, plastic jugs, mouth mufflers, scuba masks, paper bags, and soda cans. Begin the exercise

by using one of the objects to make a noise. Then attempt to produce a word using the object as a mouthpiece. Finally, try to voice a complete sentence or quotation with the object.

For example, the sentence or quotation might be Mark Twain's humorous suggestion that "Familiarity breeds contempt, and children;" George Moore's sober reflection that "After all, there is but one race -- humanity;" or the nonsense rhyme "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." Other sources might include popular music lyrics, familiar book titles, wise sayings, or well-known film titles.

After each student actor has demonstrated each object and voiced an appropriate sentence or quotation, repeat the exercise without the object. Try to duplicate with the natural voice the sound produced by the object; creating a series of vocal special effects that give added dimension and meaning to the language. Repetition of this exercise should lessen the tendency of student actors to tense up in classroom performance; and should also provide an excitement of interest in subsequent classroom performances that involve reading aloud.

The exercise may also be extended to include group performances that promote the ability to cultivate a "vocal vocabulary" of tones and shades of meaning that produce sounds that are crisp and clear in classroom performance. Some examples of appropriate literature for group performances might include excerpts from T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," Alfred Noyes' "The Highwayman," Rod McKuen's Eighteen, Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Princess," Gloria Guinness' "Love Is," Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool," Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich, or Wole Soyinka's "The Strong Breed."

Summary

Successful approaches to playing-the-role initially depend upon a student actor's ability to analyze literature to determine what the author has suggested about characterization and to cultivate critical skills of analysis that ultimately give voice and body to a character in classroom performance. Careful analysis of the literature includes reading literature with a critical eye, cultivating mental symbols that clearly define character, and a classroom performance blueprint that promotes perceptive interpretation and three-dimensional characterization. The extent to which the selected exercises may be used in classroom exploration to reveal individual student interpretations and understandings of the literature being studies and performed is the true measure of traditional role-playing associated with performance approaches to characterization.